

Green Group Amendments to the Cabinet Budget 2013

Introduction

This is the fourth consecutive budget to deliver major cuts in services, and three more are promised in the Medium Term Financial Plan. The total savings are £200million, of which £60million are said to have been reinvested, for a cut of £140million. The economic policies of the national government are such that we can predict that there will be further cuts. The area most damaged is Adult Social Care, which bears at least 40% of the burden, a total of £56million, of which £30million will be taken over the next four years. The people affected are extremely disabled. The criteria which must be satisfied for them to get any help at all makes this a necessity. These cuts will inevitably cause suffering to people whom it is our responsibility to help. It is possible to avoid damaging these people and it is the primary function of this amendment to show how that can be done. This sequence of cuts undermines local government itself. It is possible the progress of more than a hundred years will be reversed.

The Green Party would prefer that adequate services for disabled people and children were funded by collecting the taxes which very rich individuals and major corporations presently evade. However, that would require a government with different priorities. We see a way to be of practical help here and now. We therefore propose a Council Tax increase of 3.75%, which would cost the average Council Tax payer an additional £20.44 for the year or £1.70 per month. Over four years we would raise about £30million, £24million of which would go directly to Adult Social Care. We are happy that it would require a referendum to achieve the increases. We believe that the people of the County, faced with the consequences of continued cuts, would choose to pay the modest increases. If they do not, then our proposals would fall.

The extra Council Tax will restore less than half the funding that the Cabinet budget removes, but it will restore almost all of the Adult Social Care 'savings'.

Adult Social Care:

The present system is seriously flawed. Social Care has been underfunded by Labour and Conservative Governments for many years and has been hit by unprecedented cuts in the last three years. Oxfordshire has, for many years, been a low spender on Adult Social Care, compared to other Councils. We do not criticize the Councillors and staff who have worked hard to minimize the impact of inadequate funding.

Prevention and early intervention are particularly undeveloped. There is acknowledgement of their importance but too little money has been allocated to make it real. This makes life harder for the people affected. It is also foolish because many people deteriorate and need more expensive care than they would have with earlier help.

We are working toward fewer and shorter hospital stays and a reduction in residential care. Most people prefer to remain in their own homes as long as possible. But if that home life means long lonely days or grinding, unrelieved work by tired carers it would not be a great success. That is the

situation for too many people in Oxfordshire and cuts are making it worse. This amendment would provide substantial funding to help communities to make it possible for people with disabilities and their families to lead healthier and more fulfilled lives.

Community Workers for Supportive Communities:

We propose that every village and neighbourhood in the County be helped to provide activities and befriending networks for people of all ages, in the way that they desire. This means full use of public buildings and increased support for Village and Community Centres. It means the employment of Community Workers, by the County or voluntary sector organisations, whose role is to help local people create and maintain the activities they choose. There is a huge supply of good will and skill in all our communities. Public services and communities are not walled off. They strengthen and interact with each other. We provide funds for three Community Workers for each of the five District Council areas.

Advice and Advocacy:

There are tens of millions of pounds of disability and pension benefits which are not being claimed by Oxfordshire residents who are entitled to them. We provide funding so that every GP surgery in the County would have two sessions a week of first-class advice, including benefits, housing, community care, debt and local activities. The advisors would stand by people who are unable to make the complicated case needed to access benefits and services. This service would be provided through or in partnership with the CAB and other competent agencies. It is often said that an efficient Advice and Advocacy programme will bring £5 to £10 of increased income to claimants for each £1 spent. On this basis, the £2million we propose to spend would bring between £10 and £20million pounds to people who are entitled to the money, and will use it to improve their heating, food or leisure and will largely spend it in our local businesses. As important as the money is the preventive effect of timely, important information.

Older People's Day Centres:

The proposed increase in charges and transport charges, at the end of the phasing in period, will be from £5 a day to £20. That is a lot for many people who need the service. Some will drop out, to their loss and ours. The reduction in usage will threaten the whole service. The Day Centres can be hubs to the very large number of local Lunch Clubs and other activities which we call Tier 1 and which engage many more elderly and disabled people than Tiers 3 (these Day Centres) and Tier 2. With support and advice from the experienced and trained staff in the Day Centres many people will be able to remain within their communities which will be better able to care for them. The Centres will be able to contribute rather than wasting their efforts on fund-raising with the constant fear of closure. This expenditure allows for a fair increase, from £5 to £10 at the end of the phasing, but removes the dangers posed by the drastic increase.

Carers Services (including short breaks):

By now everyone knows that our entire Health and Social care system really rests on the backs of the relatives and friends we call Carers. The County has significantly improved services for Carers in recent years. While that was happening the goalposts have been moving. Not only do we have a population with a rapidly growing number of very old people, we have many older Carers: 90 year old spouses, 70 year old 'children' who are also looking after grandchildren, both of whose parents

are working, many people in their eighties who are still caring for Learning Disabled children. There are the parents of the many people who would not have survived in earlier times, but are now making lives for themselves with the loving attention of those parents. Years of cuts are straining everybody. This funding will make a practical difference. It will also be a message that we will not desert those who are doing so much.

Mencap has done a recent survey which found that 80% of the parents of people with Learning Disabilities find themselves at breaking point. This is the same as in their survey 10 years ago. The two things that can improve life for Carers are good services for their loved ones and both regular and flexible short breaks. This funding is an important addition to what already exists, although still far too little

Add Funding for a Specialist and Crisis Care Team (in-house):

Last year the Council eliminated the remnants of its directly employed Domiciliary Care staff. They were seen to be unable to compete with Agencies whose staff usually had no pension plan and often were not paid for the time traveling from client to client. The wages for both publicly and privately employed staff were and remain low. There is increasing evidence of poor quality service from the private agencies and concern about the future of a very important occupation. The idea that Care Work requires minimal skills, aptitude and training is increasingly seen to be inaccurate.

I understand that the Council has employed a small number of Care staff to provide flexibility. We would like to build on that. There are many clients who require the attention of a particularly sensitive and skilled person. This fund can help in the development of such a team. It will also be able to work where there is a shortage of private agencies and in times of unusual levels of illness.

Restore Half the Cuts to Learning Disabled and Physically Disabled People:

The 'personal budget' approach to Social Care is meant to provide services which are closer to the desires of the individual. It is not meant to be a way of surreptitiously reducing those services. The idea that £4million for Learning Disabled people can magically be saved by "more efficient delivery of care" is unbelievable. It can only be done by real cuts in service. Our amendment restores £2million. It is by no means certain that this increase will allow for proper provision of care, but it will come much closer. Similarly the £400,000 cut in the budget for Physically Disabled is based on the marvellous efficiency. There will need to be well documented evidence of how this is done. We restore half the cut, £200,000, and hope that will meet the needs.

Restore £12 million to Older People's Services:

The cuts to Older People's services are many and rather strange. £4.155million is 'saved' by having the 'Older People's Pool' meet its own pressures. This is not really a plan and can only be made by cuts which will be made in unidentified ways. There is an item which invests £300,000 in early client intervention to reduce the cost of care in one year. On the basis of this investment £1.2 million is cut the following year. This just makes a joke of the valid principle of early intervention leading to savings. I am fully convinced that Staff and Councillors are working hard to preserve services in the face of unprecedented cuts but it is misleading to pretend it can be done without considerable loss. Our amendment restores £12million which should allow for services to be maintained over the next four years.

Increase Spending on Mental Health:

I hear a lot from constituents with Mental Health problems. They are aware that cuts made over many years have made their lives more difficult. The issues are complex but County Council Social Workers have made important contributions in the past and, while there is no simplistic division between Social Service and health approaches, there is room for an increased input into an important and struggling situation.

Planning and Funding to Provide Services when Carers Become Unable to Care:

The two over-riding issues that have worried Carers are what happen when there is a sudden reason why they cannot perform their caring role and the even more desperate concern to know that their loved one will be properly cared for when they die or become incapacitated. The County has made extraordinary progress on the first and very large numbers of Carers are signed up in a scheme which operates 24/7 to make sure that immediate care is available. In my contact with Carers I find that the second concern remains unmet. The first need is for a systematic approach to all Carers and Service users to discuss what their fears are and how they could be met. The goal would be for all Carers to have agreed a long-term plan and for the County to confirm that it will meet the needs which cannot otherwise be met. It may be that this will not be very expensive because the County would anyway have to intervene if it was necessary. The main difference would be early assessment and certainty. This would be of great comfort to all concerned.

Children, Education and Families:

Restore Savings in Children's Centres:

From 2014 onwards £800,000 a year will be removed from Children's Centres. Children's Centres are one of the great social advances of recent years. They are important in areas with many poor and/or troubled families where they provide mutual support, learning about children and pleasure for parents and children without stigma. They increasingly provide similar benefits for higher earning families who share the strains of work and child care. It is good news that none of the Centres are being closed but this is a major cut in funding and will create inevitable problems. The staffing was diluted in the passage from Sure Start to Children's Centres. There is no doubt that assistance with the care of small children is a useful and efficient way of avoiding desperate and expensive outcomes. Our amendment restores the cuts in full.

Short Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children:

Being the parent of a child with serious disabilities is often continuous and unremitting hard work. It can create strains between partners and problems for other children. A regular short break to which they can look forward is a great help. Flexible help in an emergency is also life-restoring. It is not easy to make good provision because of the diversity of needs. Some children find it hard being with others and may need a liver-in carer. Some children thrive on the company. Making possible this help to people who are, without complaint, devoting themselves to their difficult responsibilities, is a basic requirement for those of us who need it, for those who will someday need it and for the rest of us, happy to participate in a decent society. The additional tax provides £800,000 to add to the other funds available.

Support English Language Teaching (ESOL):

It is of enormous importance that people living in a country learn to speak its language. It is important for the individuals, for their children, for the economy and for us all to get to know each other. Labour and Conservative governments sharply reduced the number of free places available for learners. In Oxfordshire this meant a reduction of 700 students; people who wanted to learn but could no longer afford the tuition. Support was initially limited to people on benefits. Most of our newer residents were in families with people in employment but on low incomes.

There has been much work recently to improve the situation. The County, other publicly funded providers, voluntary groups and community groups have been working together. There have been an increase in trained volunteers, efforts to put them in touch with prospective students and the creation of a small bursary fund for those who need the certificates that only official, paid-for courses can provide. These various initiatives are in need of money to improve and expand their efforts. This funding would be of great help and repay itself many times over.

Increase Social Work Support for Adolescents:

Well publicized cases have made clear the level of vulnerability of adolescents in our society. Protecting them is difficult and expensive, as is helping them put their lives together after painful events. The Cabinet's budget includes a significant increase in funding for Social Workers. It is not likely to be enough. This amendment allows for an additional useful sum. The young people and society at large pay a high price if this work is not done well.

Supporting People:

Homelessness Services:

Homelessness in Oxford is increasing and will increase further with the long recession and destructive Government policies. We see more rough sleepers on the streets but many more are hidden. Supporting People has been systematically cut and its provision for homeless people is at especial risk. This is a modest amount which will provide some help. In economic downturns it is important to provide services for the worst hit, which is good for them and helpful for the economy.

Cultural Services:

Libraries, Museums and Historical Services have been cut over recent years. They are of great importance to our lives. We need increased funding such as this to provide buoyance to services which feel under siege. They can attract local support to reach out and create and repay enthusiasm. It is a waste to use volunteer support as sometimes grudging defenders of threatened services. These funds allow for optimism.

Banbury Mill Arts Centre:

The Centre has been very successful in providing a very varied range of activities. It is of great importance to Banbury and the substantial cut is damaging. Oxfordshire remains an unequal place for the Arts, broadly defined, with such a large proportion in Oxford. The Mill is a model to be emulated, not reduced.

Prudential Borrowing Costs:

Borrow £4million to Improve Dangerous Roads:

The Government used the statistics of the numbers of people Killed and Injured on the roads (KSI) over the last few years of the past century to establish targets for each Authority, aiming to cut the numbers in half over the following ten years. In the first five years Oxfordshire was pretty much on target and deaths and serious injuries declined in line with the rest of the country. Over the next five years the rest of the country continued to improve and their KSI went down by 26%. Oxfordshire didn't improve at all. For unknown reasons it has fallen behind the rest of the country. The current Government has abandoned targets but targets or no, something has to be done in Oxfordshire to bring us in line with the rest of the country. One way is to tackle the stretches of road which are known to have high accident rates. The Cabinet Member has identified five such stretches, four of which are in Oxford City. He said he could not deal with them because of lack of funds. We propose £4million pounds to be borrowed to improve these stretches with the goal of reducing serious accidents.

Borrow £1 million pounds to Reduce Cycling Accidents:

The results of the targeting exercise described above revealed a disastrous situation with regard to deaths and serious injuries to cyclists. The target aimed to reduce KSI by half in the ten years. For cyclists, the target certainly wasn't met. Instead the numbers doubled. This is a horrible waste of health and life and puts a dampener on cycling which provides valuable exercise and is a carbon free mode of transport. We propose borrowing £1million pounds for the County to investigate, to consult with cyclists and other road users and to devise means of reducing this frightening toll.

Borrow £5 million to Improve Insulation and Reduce Fuel Poverty:

Climate change is increasingly destructive, causing droughts and floods and other unusual weather. Much of the world, certainly including the U.K. is being slow to reduce the carbon emissions which are the main cause. One of the most efficient ways of doing this is to reduce the need to burn carbon emitters by improving insulation. There have been various government initiatives to encourage home insulation, including full grants to poor and/or elderly or disabled people. These have had some success in take-up but it has been patchy. The most successful approach was by Kirklees Council. They designated whole areas for free insulation and went door-to-door to help householders fill out the necessary paperwork. For every pound they put up they were able to draw in seven pounds from the Government and energy companies which were required to pay for needy people who met their criteria. The most generous of these schemes have now come to an end. There is, however, a new policy for the poorest and most vulnerable people, the Energy Company obligation (ECO). The Council would designate the Wards in the County, both urban and in communities of under 10,000, with the most poverty and disability for the Kirklees approach. There would be heavy publicity about the availability of free insulation and the door to door approach. The ECO could be expected to provide for a large portion of the households in the areas known for poverty and/or disability. We might attract an equal amount of funding to the £5million we are investing. At any rate, we would be able to insulate many thousands of houses. This would save a

large amount of carbon and make many people warmer and with lower fuel bills. We could make a large dent in the number of people in the County who suffer fuel poverty. We know there are a substantial number who struggle to keep warm, with serious consequences for their health, also entailing a large amount of expense for health and Social Care agencies.

Conclusion:

We are proposing an increase in the Cabinet's suggested Council Tax rate, from 1.99% to 3.75%. It will cost the average Council Tax payer an additional £20.44 a year (£1.70 per month). This would require a referendum. We welcome the opportunity to focus public attention on the importance of the County's services, the costs of the lower tax rate and how much of great value could be accomplished with a small increase.